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OXFORD PAMPHLETS ON WORLD AFFAIRS

No. 41

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THE' ORIGINS OF  
THE WAR

BY

E. L. WOODWARD

OXFORD  
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1940

IN this Pamphlet Mr. Woodward first describes the immediate events leading up to the outbreak of war: Hitler's demands on Poland, and their rejection, the familiar German 'drum-fire of lies and calumnies' against the intended victim, the failure of the British attempt to hold open the door to negotiation.

Next he traces the history of international relations in Europe during the years between Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and Munich. 'These years 'will be a warning to future generations about the difficulties in the way of giving form and force to the peaceful desires of the majority against the stark and unscrupulous threats of a minority of the world's inhabitants'.

Finally he turns to the deeper causes of the war, the hostilities of certain dominant tendencies in German thought to the liberal, humanitarian philosophy and way of life of Western civilization. 'National Socialism inherited an evil tradition. Unless this tradition is understood, it is impossible to realize the deeper causes working towards war in Germany.'

Mr. Woodward is a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, who has specialized in the study of modern European history. His two best-known books are his volume in the *Oxford History of England* entitled *The Age of Reform (1815-1870)* and *Great Britain and the German Navy*.

FIRST PUBLISHED 5 DECEMBER 1940

*Printed in Great Britain and published by*  
THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS *Amen House, E.C.*  
LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO  
MELBOURNE CAPE TOWN BOMBAY CALCUTTA ~~MADRAS~~  
HUMPHREY MILFORD *Publisher to the University*

## THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR

THE immediate cause of the war was the German attack on Poland. A German war of aggression against the Polish people meant a German war against Great Britain and France, since these two Powers had promised to come to the aid of Poland 'in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces'.<sup>1</sup>

Hitler and his associates knew, and accepted, the consequences of their attack upon Polish independence. It seems possible, indeed, that Hitler, deluded by Ribbentrop, believed that, if the Germans could overrun Poland quickly by sheer weight of numbers and terrorism, Great Britain and France would then accept accomplished facts and allow Germany, with Russia as her accomplice, to enslave the Poles as she had already enslaved the Czechs. Hitler may well have believed Ribbentrop, since the National Socialist theory of State approved of acts of bad faith in international relations, and the Führer himself had broken treaty after treaty. Nevertheless, the German leaders were ready to fight Great Britain and France. Ten days before the outbreak of war Hitler said to Sir Neville Henderson that 'he was fifty years old; he preferred war now to when he would be fifty-five or sixty'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Prime Minister in the House of Commons, 31 March 1939. This British guarantee was reaffirmed in the Anglo-Polish agreement of 25 August 1939. The French already had treaties with Poland—notably the Franco-Polish Political Agreement of 1921, and the Franco-Polish treaty signed at Locarno in 1925.

<sup>2</sup> British Blue Book: *Documents concerning German-Polish*

More than half a century earlier Moltke had written of the war fought by Prussia against Austria in these words: 'The war of 1886 did not take place because Prussia was threatened, or in obedience to public opinion, or to the will of the people. It was a war long foreseen, prepared with deliberation, and recognised as necessary by the Cabinet, not in order to obtain territorial aggrandisement, but in order to secure the establishment of Prussian hegemony in Germany.' Germans recur, and there is a grim sameness about their history and their ideas. It is therefore important to look beyond the questions of Danzig and the Polish Corridor in order to understand why German military force and German terrorism were loosed again in Europe in 1939.

At the same time, in a matter of such terrible gravity for all civilized peoples the immediate occasion of the war deserves study no less than the deeper causes. Moreover, the events leading up to the outbreak of hostilities throw much light on these deeper causes. Throughout the summer of 1939 Germans and German diplomacy were true to type.

### **I. The Immediate Cause. Danzig and the Corridor**

The prelude to the war came in March 1939. In this month Hitler added to his previous breaches of faith by the occupation of Prague and the suppression of the last remains of Czech independence. The next stage in German aggression against weaker States seemed likely to be an attack on Poland. Hitler had signed, in 1934, a ten years' agreement

*relations and the outbreak of hostilities between Great Britain and Germany on September 3, 1939 (Cmd. 6106), p. 100.*



with Poland. He had said to the Reichstag, in 1936, that it would be 'unreasonable and impossible' to deny Poland 'any outlet to the sea at all'. He had declared, in 1938, that, after the settlement of the Sudeten question, Germany had no more territorial demands in Europe. In the spring of 1939, however, it had become evident that Hitler's promises merely indicated the direction of his next act of treachery. In order to make it clear beyond doubt that Great Britain and France, now disillusioned of their hopes of European 'appeasement', intended to resist further aggression by Germany, these two Powers gave their pledge of assistance to Poland. The two western democracies hoped that this pledge would be followed by a league of all peacefully-minded European States to preserve Europe from reversion to the law of the jungle. They looked, as it turned out in vain, for the support of the U.S.S.R. in this endeavour.

Before they received a promise of help from the British and French Governments that they would defend Poland, the Poles had already rejected demands made by Hitler for the return of Danzig to the Reich and the grant of a wide zone across the Polish Corridor which would allow the construction of a military road and railway. It is necessary to be clear on this point. Why did the Poles refuse these demands? The answer reveals at once the deeper causes of the war: the impossibility of trusting Germany. If the return of Danzig to the Reich had been the sole question at issue, if the creation of 'a corridor across the corridor' had been merely a matter of economic convenience, or even of political sentiment, these concessions might have been

granted. The Poles knew, the Germans knew, and the world knew, from previous experience, that such concessions were the first stage, for Poland, on the road down which the Czechs had been compelled to travel to their destruction. Hitler had made no secret of his eastern aims. They could be read in *Mein Kampf*. Not a single word had been retracted. Russia might be strong enough and far enough away to resist these eastern plans. Poland, deprived of her main strategic positions, surrounded and strangled by Germany, cut off from the sea by a military line defended with all the force Germany could command, would be at the mercy of German ambitions. In any case Ribbentrop let it be known, during his visit to Warsaw in January 1939, that the political implication of acceptance of the German requests would be the close alinement of Polish foreign policy with that of the Reich. Hence the Poles rejected the German demands, and rejected them before they were sure of an Anglo-French guarantee. It would be idle talk to suggest that, if they cared for their independence, their very existence as a nation, they could have done otherwise than reject these demands.

The German answer was to denounce the ten years' agreement with Poland. In other words, Hitler showed that the Poles were right in their suspicions. Henceforward the danger of war was immediate. The British and French Governments, with the British Government in the lead, did their utmost to ease the strain, while the Germans took every step possible to aggravate the tension and to intensify anti-Polish feeling in Germany. The German press invented story after story of 'atro-

cities' against Germans in Poland. The Germans saw openly to the defence of Danzig, and treated the Free City as a National Socialist stronghold. On Aug. 23 Ribbentrop, in Hitler's name, signed a non-aggression pact with the U.S.S.R. An agreement with the U.S.S.R. conflicted, nominally, with almost every important statement of policy which Hitler had made before and after his rise to power. There was, however, no inner conflict. Words, to Hitler, were counters; his promises or pledges of non-aggression would be kept as long as, and no longer than, it suited German convenience to keep them. For the moment, an agreement with Communist Russia was necessary because the German army command wished to avoid the risk of war on two fronts.

Hitler made a second move. He offered an Anglo-German understanding on condition that he had his way in Poland. The offer was made in curious language. Hitler told Sir Neville Henderson that he was 'a man of great decisions. He accepted the British Empire, and was ready to pledge himself personally for its continued existence and to place the power of the German Reich at its disposal',<sup>1</sup> if his conditions were fulfilled. The British reply was plain. 'The German Government will be aware that His Majesty's Government have obligations to Poland by which they are bound and which they intend to honour. They could not, for any advantage offered to Great Britain, acquiesce in a settlement which put in jeopardy the independence of a State to whom they have given their guarantee.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> British Blue Book, p. 121 (25 Aug. 1939).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 126 (28 Aug.).

### **The British Proposal for Direct Negotiations**

In spite of the German preparations for immediate war, the British Government still tried to find a solution which would satisfy Hitler's *amour-propre* and, at the same time, preserve the existence of Poland. They suggested 'the initiation of direct discussions between the German and Polish Governments on a basis which would include . . . the safeguarding of Poland's essential interests and the securing of the settlement by an international guarantee'.<sup>1</sup> They found no difficulties on the Polish side. The Poles well knew what the ordeal of war might mean to them; they were ready to go as far as they could go towards placating the Germans without putting themselves in the terrible position of the Czechs after Munich. Hence the Polish Government agreed to the principle of direct negotiations, obviously on condition that these negotiations were real, and that the Polish representatives were not treated like President Hacha of Czechoslovakia, and compelled to give way to German force.

The British proposal put Hitler in a difficulty. His method of eluding this difficulty illuminates the deeper reasons for the outbreak of the war. The British plan aimed at the removal of grievances by peaceful negotiation. The plan implied that each side should state its case; that all grievances of Poles against Germans and Germans against Poles should be examined impartially and quietly at a conference table, and that the negotiating parties were genuinely anxious to avoid war. The Poles certainly, as the weaker party, did not want war,

<sup>1</sup> British Blue Book, p. 127 (28 Aug. 1939).

but the Germans had already decided on war, and upon the annihilation of Poland as an independent State. If they came to a conference, and rejected every peaceful solution put before them, if they allowed the Poles to expose the hollowness of the German case, and the deliberate manufacture of 'incidents' and 'atrocities', they destroyed every pretext for going to war. If, on the other hand, they refused outright to hold any discussion with the Poles, again they showed themselves the aggressors.

### **Hitler attacks Poland**

Hence, with war, not peace, in their hearts, the German leaders could neither easily accept nor easily reject the British plan. Hitler chose a way of escape which deceived no one (outside Germany) at the time, and will not deceive posterity. He accepted the British proposal and, at the same time, added conditions to his acceptance which destroyed all chance of peaceful and reasonable negotiation. His answer was given on the evening of 29 August 1939. He demanded the arrival in Berlin, on the following day (30 August), of a Polish representative with full powers. In other words, the Polish representative would be given the German terms, and, without referring them to the Polish Government, would have to accept or reject them forthwith. The Polish Government would have to send their representative without knowing what terms would be put in front of him for his immediate acceptance. There were to be no free negotiations, no exchange of views, no examination of the truth of German allegations. The sinister drama which Hitler had

played with the Austrians and with the Czechs would be repeated.

The British Ambassador told Hitler and Ribbentrop that their demand sounded like an ultimatum. The British Government regarded the demand for the immediate arrival of a Polish plenipotentiary as 'wholly unreasonable',<sup>1</sup> and suggested that the German Government should follow the normal procedure of handing their proposals, when ready, to the Polish Ambassador for transmission to Warsaw, and of inviting suggestions about the conduct of the negotiations. Sir Nevile Henderson put this plan to Ribbentrop on 30 Aug., but 'in the most violent terms Herr von Ribbentrop said that he would never ask the Polish Ambassador to visit him. He hinted that if the Polish Ambassador asked him for an interview it might be different.'<sup>2</sup> Ribbentrop refused to give the British Ambassador a copy of the terms upon which Germany insisted, although the German Government had promised, if possible, to submit their proposals to the British Government before the arrival of the Polish plenipotentiary. The terms were merely read out in German 'at top speed'<sup>3</sup> to Sir Nevile Henderson, and Ribbentrop said that it was 'too late'<sup>4</sup> to hand over a copy of the text, since the Polish plenipotentiary had not arrived within the time limit laid down by Hitler.

Meanwhile the Polish Government instructed their Ambassador to seek an interview at the German Foreign Office in order to confirm the Polish acceptance of the British plan. The Polish Ambassador called on Ribbentrop at 6.30 p.m. on 31

<sup>1</sup> British Blue Book, p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

August. He was told that unless he had come with full powers to accept the German proposals (which had not yet been told to the Polish Government or to the Ambassador) his visit was useless.

The visit was indeed useless. The German travesty of the British plan had served its flimsy purpose.<sup>1</sup> All preparations were complete, and on 1 September German troops crossed the Polish frontier, and German aeroplanes began the bombardment of Polish towns, while Hitler announced the reunion of Danzig to the Reich. The British and French Governments sent a warning note to Germany that they would fulfil their obligations to Poland unless the Germans suspended 'all aggressive action' against Poland, and were prepared 'promptly to withdraw their forces from Polish territory'.<sup>2</sup>

There remained one faint hope of preventing a European war. On 31 August Mussolini had suggested to the British and French Governments a plan for a Five-Power Conference. The plan, in accordance with the obvious wishes of Mussolini's

<sup>1</sup> The last, and almost ludicrous, feature in this German make-believe was an assertion, in November 1939, that, in order to lead the Germans into a war which Great Britain had planned for the destruction of the Reich, the British Government deliberately deceived the German Government in saying that the Poles had given their consent to direct Polish-German negotiations. It is difficult to understand why, if the British Government had wished for war, they should have urged these direct negotiations upon Poland and Germany alike. In any case, the facts speak for themselves. In addition to the evidence in the British Blue Book, the British Government subsequently published the telegram giving the Polish consent. In the German White Book (December, 1939) on the origins of the war this telegram is ignored, and in the preface to the book (signed by Ribbentrop) the charge is again repeated.

<sup>2</sup> British Blue Book, p. 168 (1 Sept.).

German partner, envisaged as a preliminary condition the surrender of Danzig. The British Government refused to agree that the Poles should be compelled to give way in advance on one of the main points which the Conference would meet to discuss. Then followed the opening of the German attack in all its ferocity. On 2 September the Italian Government again approached both the British and the French Governments. The British and French Governments pointed out that, before any conference could meet, the Germans must cease from attacking Poland, and withdraw their armies from Polish soil. A conference between the aggressor and the two western allies of Poland, while the German armies were advancing rapidly across the country they intended to conquer, would have suited Hitler well. A conference on the terms suggested by Great Britain, and supported by France, would have prevented the German occupation of Poland. Hence the Germans were bound to pay no attention to it; they continued without respite their invasion and their bombardment of Polish towns while the Italian proposals were under discussion.

On the morning of 3 September Great Britain and France sent an ultimatum to the German Government to the effect that, unless the conditions laid down in the warning notes of 1 September were given effect, the two Governments would be at war with Germany in fulfilment of their pledges to Poland. Before nightfall the second war between Germany and the two western democracies had begun.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The British ultimatum was delivered at 9.0 a.m. and expired



## **II. The Troubled Years : 1933-1939**

Such, in outline, were the immediate causes of the war. The details of the exchange of diplomatic correspondence can be read in the British Blue Book and in the publications of the French and Polish Governments. Two facts stand out: German bad faith, and German aggression. These two facts had become increasingly clear in the European horizon ever since Hitler attained the German Chancellorship at the end of January 1933. It is always dangerous, in the light of an after-knowledge of events, to deduce a chain of inevitability from past to present. The leaders of the democratic States were not altogether foolish in regarding Hitler at first as a somewhat doubtful figure; an adventurer who knew how to exploit his 'nuisance value', but who appeared, in these early days, to be making a great deal of noise over a number of minor successes, but not always to be speaking his real mind when he mouthed phrases about war, or always telling lies when he spoke of peaceful intentions.

Nevertheless, the six years and a half between Hitler's accession to power and the outbreak of war in 1939 will be a warning to future generations about the difficulties in the way of giving form and force to the peaceful desires of the majority against the stark and unscrupulous threats of a minority of the world's inhabitants. It is not easy to say when the cause of peace was finally lost. Germany had already left the Disarmament Conference before Hitler became Chancellor of the Reich. She had at 11.0 a.m. (British Summer Time). The French ultimatum expired at 5.0 p.m.

agreed to return under a formula adopted after much discussion, which recognized her 'equality of status in a system which would provide security for all nations'. The British Government attempted to give this formula practical effect in a draft disarmament convention. While diplomatic discussions were taking place about the British plan, the bellicose speeches of National-Socialist leaders and their plain intention to rearm on land, on sea, and particularly in the air, destroyed the hope of finding a system which would provide security for all nations. The final withdrawal of Germany from the Conference in October 1933, and the simultaneous announcement of her withdrawal from the League of Nations<sup>1</sup> were followed by separate negotiations between the Powers concerned. Great Britain took part in and encouraged these negotiations, and tried to find means of allaying French fears and of setting a limit to Hitler's increasing demands. In March 1934 the publication of the German financial estimates for the coming year showed such enormous increases in military, naval, and air expenditure that the French Government refused to continue discussions which would have resulted in the diminution of French armaments. Once again the British Government attempted to bring about a general settlement. Negotiations were opened for an Eastern Pact on the general lines of the Locarno agreements, and, in the early part of 1935, for an Air Pact. These negotiations

<sup>1</sup> According to the terms of the Covenant, two years' notice was required before the withdrawal became effective. Germany took no direct part in the political deliberations or acts of the League after October 1933.

continued until March 1936.<sup>1</sup> The failure to reach agreement was, again, almost entirely the fault of Hitler.

### **Germany denounces Locarno**

The denunciation of the Locarno Treaty and the remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936 thus came at the end, or rather at the end of the first stage, of a long series of Hitler's acts of bad faith. The Locarno agreements had not been 'dictated' to Germany; she had entered into them of her own free will and had affirmed, more than once, her intention to respect them. The excuse for breaking faith was worthless. The Germans complained that the Franco-Soviet Treaty was itself a breach of the Locarno Treaty. This view was not shared by the British, French, Italian, and Belgian Governments. The Germans had given their consent to bilateral agreements between States which would come into a general eastern pact, and it was common knowledge that these bilateral agreements would include a Franco-Soviet Pact. Finally, if the Germans had any grounds of complaint, they were under obligation to bring them before the Permanent Court of International Justice at The Hague.

In spite of the accumulation of evidence that Germany could not be trusted, and in spite of the increasing tempo of German rearmament, the western Powers were unwilling to fight a preventive war. It is outside the province of this inquiry into

<sup>1</sup> A series of diplomatic documents recording the exchanges of views between the Powers on the subject of these Pacts was published in a British Blue Book: *Correspondence showing the course of certain Diplomatic Discussions directed towards securing an European Settlement, June, 1934 to March, 1936* (Cmd. 5143).

the causes of the present war to ask or answer the question whether a war on behalf of the maintenance of a treaty freely negotiated could be described as a preventive war. The German General Staff were afraid that they might have to meet armed resistance, and Hitler's move was undertaken against their advice. Hitler took the precaution of making, at the same time, a grand and far-reaching offer in which he asserted that Germany was ready to come back to the League of Nations, on the assumption that the Covenant of the League would be separated from the Treaty of Versailles, and that Germany's 'equality of rights' was recognized in the colonial sphere.

The German plan was discussed by the representatives of the Locarno Powers at a meeting held in Geneva in April 1936. It was agreed that, although the German offer did nothing to restore confidence in the willingness of Germany to respect new treaties any more than she had respected the Locarno agreements, full consideration ought to be given to any proposals for conciliation. The British Government was asked to put a number of questions to the German Government on points in the German plan which appeared vague and uncertain. A questionnaire was given to the German Government on 7 May.<sup>1</sup> No reply to this questionnaire was ever received,<sup>2</sup> while German policy continued to develop on lines opposed to European concilia-

<sup>1</sup> This questionnaire was published as a White Paper (Cmd. 5175 of 1936).

<sup>2</sup> In his speech of January 1937 Hitler had the impudence to say that 'it was not possible for the German Government, for reasons which the British Government will appreciate, to reply to those questions'.

tion and to co-operation in the maintenance of international law and order. Italy and Japan had broken the Covenant of the League. Germany sought their company. The Rome-Berlin Axis was proclaimed on 1 November 1936. Three weeks later Germany and Japan signed the so-called 'Anti-Comintern' Pact. Germany and Italy used the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in July 1936, as an opportunity for increasing their military and political influence and for testing new armaments and new methods of war; German military aeroplanes, for example, flew to Spanish Morocco within three days of the outbreak of fighting.

### **German Preparations for War**

Thus the year 1937 brought no relief. In January Hitler made what was becoming his usual speech about German good intentions. 'The period of so-called surprises has come to an end. Germany is more conscious than ever that she has a European task before her, which is to collaborate loyally in getting rid of those problems that are a cause of anxiety to ourselves and also to the nations.' In fact, throughout this year, the Germans worked steadily to secure themselves against any risks which might be involved in their next acts of bad faith. They devoted their resources and their industry—at the expense of the standard of living of German workpeople, and with reckless disregard of economic consequences—to the manufacture of material of war. They were thus responsible for a new and intense 'armaments race', in which, for internal reasons, Great Britain and France began all too slowly to make up the leeway they had lost. In

spite of this atmosphere of increasing calamity the British Government refused to give up all belief in the possibility of 'appeasement' (a term which, in its French equivalent, had been used of European reconciliation during more hopeful years). British policy, as shown, for example, in the visit of Lord Halifax to Berlin in November 1937, continued to ignore German expressions of petulance and bad manners, and to test the sincerity of Hitler's talk of peace by asking what Germany really wanted as the conditions of a final settlement. These attempts were as unsuccessful as all such attempts since the rise of National Socialism to power.

### Munich

The last phase opened with the occupation and annexation of Austria in 1938. This act secured the military and economic encirclement of Czechoslovakia, and led directly to the crisis which ended, temporarily, with the Munich agreement. It was clear, within a few weeks, that Hitler's talk of peace at Munich was merely a continuation of his treachery. This immediate evidence of German bad faith caused an outburst of anger in the democratic countries, notably in Great Britain, against the Governments which had trusted Hitler's word and, consequently, sacrificed the Czechs to German terrorism. The argument may be left to posterity. One set of observers may consider that—to the last—the responsible leaders of Great Britain and France were right in thinking that Hitler must be taken at his word, and given a final opportunity of turning his undisciplined mind towards order and quiet. The chances of a return to sanity might be

slight, but upon these chances rested the one hope of saving not only the Czechs but the whole world from the infinite horrors of war. Another set of observers may sum up their judgement of Munich in the terms of the old proverb 'God builds the nest of the blind bird'; in other words, Great Britain and France, in assuming Hitler wanted a peaceful settlement, did in fact deprive him of an occasion for making war against the Czechs and the western Powers at a time when the armaments of Great Britain (and, for that matter, of the U.S.S.R.) were at their weakest, especially in the air, in comparison with the armies and the air force of Germany.

In any case, from the point of view of the origins of the present war, the enlightenment or moral strength of the democratic protagonists at Munich are of little relevance. War was not averted; it was merely postponed. Hitler's promises meant nothing to him. Henceforward they could mean nothing to those to whom they were addressed. No one could trust any promise made by the German Government in the name of the German people. Nevertheless, Hitler remained the most admired, the most popular figure in Germany. There could be no doubt that the German people would obey his orders, and also no doubt that he intended to lead them from violence to violence until the whole crazy notion of the hegemony of a chosen Germanic race had been realized throughout the world. Thousands upon thousands of Germans might indeed be Hitler's unwilling slaves, dragooned and terrorized by their own fellow countrymen; but those who secretly opposed Hitler would obey his

orders. The majority would obey willingly. They would obey Hitler because they wanted what Hitler wanted. In words spoken of the blind and doomed house of Bourbon after the French Revolution, they 'had learned nothing and forgotten nothing' since 1914. The tale of their infatuation indeed goes back many years earlier. In 1895 the socialist Bebel, watching a crowd in Berlin as it cheered a regiment of soldiers passing under the Brandenburg gate, had said of the Germans: 'The people is still drunk with victory.' National Socialism inherited an evil tradition. Unless this tradition is understood, it is impossible to realize the deeper causes working towards war in Germany.

### III. The Deeper Causes

The world, and particularly the English-speaking world, has been too ready to assume that National Socialism is a freakish thing, an accident of personalities, a sudden new turn in German history; that the views held and put into practice by Hitler, Göring, and their unpleasant company are views which do not reach back into the German past. It has also been suggested that Hitlerism is a special and peculiar reaction, of a virulent pathological kind, to the harsh treatment of Germany after the War of 1914-18 and to the exceptional sufferings of Germans during the period of currency inflation and again during the economic crisis which began at the end of 1929.

It is true that the Germans suffered hardly from the effects of the War, though it might well be said that the sufferings of France, taken all in all, were more severe. There was indeed a certain historical



justice in the penalty paid by Germany, since Germans, far more than any other people, were responsible for the outbreak of war in 1914. It is also true that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were in some respects too severe (notably on the financial side), just as in other respects these terms were unpractical and doctrinaire. Here again there has been a certain historical irony about German complaints. Before their own defeat in arms (and of this defeat there can be no question, in spite of the German legend of a 'stab in the back') the Germans had imposed upon Russia and Rumania far harsher terms than those laid down at Versailles.<sup>1</sup> To the last, also, the leaders of German industrial and intellectual life, with few exceptions, had shouted for the imposition of terms on the western Powers which would have been more stringent in every respect—including financial conditions and the surrender of territory—than the terms which the victors imposed upon Germany. It is true, again, that the terms of Versailles were imposed, dictated, just as Germany had dictated terms at Brest-Litovsk. It would be difficult to find any peace treaty, after a great war ending in a decisive victory for one side, which was not imposed against the wishes of the defeated parties. It is also impossible to suppose that any settlement which restored North Slesvig to Denmark and Alsace-Lorraine to France, and which revived the political liberty and independence of 'submerged' peoples like the Czechs or the Poles, would ever have been carried into effect if it had not been imposed upon Germany.

<sup>1</sup> See Oxford Pamphlets 6, *The Treaty of Versailles*; 14, *The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk*; 35, *Was Germany Defeated in 1918?*

The rise of Hitlerism was not due to the Treaty of Versailles, but to the military defeat of Germany. After the last war opinion in Great Britain and the United States, and, to a lesser extent, in France assumed that the fall of the Imperial régime implied a complete change of heart among Germans, and that, henceforward, militarism was broken in Germany, and that the Germans would never allow this militarism to be revived. The history of the Weimar Republic shows that these hypotheses were, unfortunately, wrong. From the outset there was no fundamental change of view among the people as a whole, and, above all, among the bureaucracy and the governing class, in a country inclined by habit of mind and long usage to follow the lead and accept the views dictated by authority.

There was, in fact, no real revolution in Germany, in the sense that there had been a real revolution in France in the years following 1789, or in Russia after 1917. The republican leaders in the early days leaned upon the army to protect them from the small group of men who wanted real revolution. These leaders were Germans, trained to German ways of thought, brought up in a German tradition. In this tradition not war, but defeat in war, was 'evil'. The 'dictated' Treaty of Versailles was an outrage, not because the treaty was 'dictated'—no German was foolish enough to suppose that a victorious Germany would have argued about peace terms with a defeated Great Britain and France—but because the dictators were not Germans, and the dictation ended German rule over people who did not want this rule, and destroyed German dreams of continental and, perhaps, world hegemony.

Germans of all parties aimed at 'breaking the bonds of Versailles'. The dividing line came between those who looked to direct military action and a war of revenge, and those who hoped for the recovery of the old dominant position of Germany through a policy of 'fulfilment' of the treaty. The former party advocated defiance, the latter a temporary submission, combined with an attempt to prove to the victors that many clauses in the treaty were unworkable, or pressed unfairly upon German economic life, or—a less reputable plea—offended German pride and made it impossible for Germany to assert her armed strength. Gustav Stresemann was the best and ablest representative of the policy of 'fulfilment'; the Locarno agreements were, on the German side, largely his work. Stresemann was a man of his word. He was also a civilized man. He did not aim at war, but he was a strong nationalist. He wanted to restore to his fellow countrymen the proud position, the dominating position, which they had held in Europe before 1914. He thought that Germany could attain to this position without war. The trouble was that, from the point of view of other States, no one could foresee what use Germany would make of her power, once she had regained it. Frenchmen, in particular, looking at their resources and numbers in relation to those of Germany, felt that they were taking grave risks in assuming that German policy would always be directed by men who were ready to honour the Locarno agreements.

Stresemann won great victories for Germany. The fact that while he was obtaining concessions from the Allies he was fighting against militant


extremists at home showed the measure of political feeling in Germany, and appeared to confirm the fears of France that the concessions made to Stresemann were being made, not to the more moderate party in Germany, but to those extremists who cared only for the restoration of German armed force. These militarists were powerful beyond their mere numbers owing to the influence which they enjoyed in high places, and to the political independence of the Reichswehr. It must be remembered, for example, that, from about 1920 until Hitler's accession to power, the Reichswehr had a secret working agreement with the U.S.S.R., according to which Germany sent to Russia yearly a number of officers to train the army of the U.S.S.R. and to gain for themselves experience in the use of weapons (tanks, heavy artillery, &c.) forbidden to the German army under the peace treaty.

After Stresemann's death in 1929, the fight of the moderates against the revival of militant nationalism in Germany was a losing one. It was indeed always something of a losing struggle because those who resisted the methods of the extremists were never wholly out of sympathy, and often very much in sympathy with the extremists' aims. The argument was one about means rather than about ends.

Even so, it is not impossible that common sense—and common decency—might at last have found a hold among the German people if there had been no economic depression. The economic depression which spread to Europe from the United States affected Germany with great severity. These effects were due in part to the reckless methods of German

borrowing in the years before the depression, but the responsibility of Germans themselves for a great part of their own misfortunes did not lessen their self-pity. The habit of blaming everything upon the 'dictated' Treaty of Versailles had indeed given to this self-pity something of a pathological turn. Other countries were hard hit by the economic depression. It is probable that the amount of suffering was greater not merely absolutely but relatively in the United States than in Germany, but neither in the United States nor in Great Britain was there much disposition to lay the blame for this suffering on other people. The Germans, on the other hand, put the whole blame on the victors of 1918. In any case, there was no leader in Germany capable of suggesting a 'new deal' other than Adolf Hitler. To Hitler the economic depression was a superb opportunity. Thousands upon thousands of Germans accepted National Socialism because it offered them a simple diagnosis of their sufferings and a simple remedy. They would have been less likely to listen to their quack doctor if they had not heard something of the same patter from more reputable German physicians.

### **Why National Socialism appealed to Germany**

It is often said that the German people never accepted National Socialism, but that National Socialism was forced upon them. The ballot figures of the elections before the electoral machinery fell into National Socialist hands (after this the figures were, of course, of course) became, according to a 'subterranean' joke, '
 
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in Europe') do not show a majority in favour of the National Socialists. It would, however, be a mistake to give these figures too much weight. The surrender of Hitler's political opponents, the quick successes obtained by National Socialist methods, were not due only to the political ineptitude of the parties of the opposition, or even to the gangster tactics adopted by Hitler and his entourage. Hitler's methods were well known long before he obtained power. His blank hostility to all forms of constitutional government and political liberty was also well known.

The active or passive acquiescence of vast numbers of Germans in National Socialism, the easy submission of all save a small and brave minority, are facts of deep historical significance. An attempt to explain these facts by talk about the 'docility' of the German people is at best only half an explanation, and at worst tautology. The Germans acquiesced in National Socialism because they could understand it. They could understand it because its appeal was typically and thoroughly German. They could understand it the more because it was expressed to them in crude and violent language, and embodied in a group of crude and violent men who represented, in an extravagant way, qualities of temper and a mental outlook firmly rooted in the German nation. This point has not been readily understood in Great Britain and the United States. Among the English-speaking nations Hitler and Göring have been recognized easily as pathological types, displaying their abnormality in every act, word, and gesture of their lives. To Germans Hitler is a heaven-born hero, and

Göring an admirable and 'jolly' kind of man. The speeches of these men—even their voices—grated on our ears long before Germany was at war with us. These harsh sounds have been music to the Germans. Hitler, who promised peace on German terms to his followers, is still, in spite of all, the demi-god. Göring, whose *Luftwaffe* was, by its mere existence, to enforce and guarantee this German peace, is still, in spite of all, a popular figure. Propaganda, skilfully conducted, has done much for this popularity of two psychical degenerates, but one has only to ask how far the best advertising agents in the world and the most lavish expenditure of money could ever have made men such as Hitler and Göring popular in Great Britain or the United States. These creatures have obtained popular acclamation in Germany because they represent the type of man which the average German tends to admire; their ideas have found acceptance because such ideas have not been foreign to the German tradition.

National Socialism has nothing original about it, unless a semi-lunatic exaggeration and pedantry can be taken as marks of originality. There is no single item in *Mein Kampf*, or in the glosses upon *Mein Kampf*, which has not a long history in Germany. Anti-Semitism (well described as 'socialism for fools') was a feature in German politics long before anyone had heard of Adolf Hitler. The programme of National Socialism, taken as a whole, had advocates in Germany and German Austria long before Adolf Hitler. Even the fact that this programme has undergone many fluctuations, does not give it novelty. The plain and sinister fact

about National Socialism is indeed its lack of originality. Hitler's appeal to the German masses would have been far less attractive if this appeal had been new and original.

### Germany and Europe

The matter can be summed up in a few words. For a long period of time, extending over many centuries, Western thought has been developing on lines which, without attaching to them to-day any special party or denominational significance, can be described as both liberal and Christian. This development of thought has been humanitarian and optimistic. Humanitarian in the sense that the starting-point of Western thinkers, in Great Britain, in the United States, and in France, has been the absolute value of the individual, and hence the equal rights of all individuals. The high problems of law and government and economics have thus become centred upon giving to the individual full opportunities for the development of his personality. Man is a social animal, and individuals live together in societies. Hence it has been necessary to provide means for the proper use of the social faculties of men—their habit of mutual aid and co-operation in large enterprises. Western thinkers and practical statesmen have therefore had to be on guard against two opposite dangers: the confusion of liberty with *laissez-faire*, and the encroachment of social or economic or political institutions upon the freedom of individuals whom these institutions exist to serve.

It would be an idle pretence to claim that these great problems have been solved either in the



political or in the economic sphere, but Western thinkers have been optimistic about their ultimate solution. The record of history shows that, by courage and endurance, by the application of reason, by the increase of knowledge, by sustained and united resistance to economic exploitation and political tyranny, large communities of men have been finding their way towards better conditions of existence and happier states of mind. Within these large communities the main (though not the only) task in our time has been the search for 'social justice'. In the relations between community and community the main task, though here also not the sole task, has been the elimination of war as senseless, cruel, and merely destructive.

For more than a hundred years, and in some respects for a much longer time, certain dominant tendencies of German intellectual life have been hostile to this liberal and Christian way of thought. Long before Hitler, popular writers in Germany had derided Western humanitarianism, denied the very conditions under which Western thinkers regarded improvement as possible, and described as mere foolishness the moral ideals which the majority of English, French, and American writers had taken for granted. The worship of power, a contempt for mercy and gentleness, the sacrifice of the individual to the State, a belief in war as the highest and most ennobling form of human activity, these were the lessons taught to the younger generation in Germany, not merely by the Hitler Youth Movement, but by school teachers in the years before the last war. Moreover, this reversion to an earlier barbarism was accompanied by a strong belief that

the Germans were a race with a mission to enforce their view of life upon other peoples. It followed that, in order to further the increase of German power, every German must subordinate his existence to the German institutions of State, and that, in order to increase the power of this State, all means were justified. These beliefs have been set out and repeated by some of the most honoured names in Germany; they have been adopted with enthusiasm by an active minority, embodied in the German educational system, until several generations in turn have been infected by them and, in our time, the youth of a whole nation holds these and no other beliefs.

Hitler is thus the creature, not the creator, of a German nationalism which justifies every bestiality, every act of bad faith practised in the interests of the increase of the power of the German State. Hitler, Göring, and their like have been admired and followed because they spell out in staring letters a theme which less forceful and less vociferous Germans had adopted for themselves. We must indeed remember Burke's words against drawing up an indictment against a whole nation. It is, of course, true that very large numbers of Germans (many of them are now exiles in Great Britain and the United States) have opposed this theory of a barbaric, unmoral, power-devouring German State.<sup>1</sup> It is also true that German intellectual life has not been limited to the discovery of sophistical reasons for giving full rein to the baser

<sup>1</sup> Just as, for example, it is known to-day that there are cases of complete nervous breakdown among Germans who have seen at first hand the behaviour of their fellow countrymen in Poland.

instincts of human nature; the debt of modern medicine, of modern physics to Germany is known to everyone. These instances could be multiplied, but the grim fact remains that the majority of the German people, and the majority of their leaders, have accepted a philosophy which, to us, is a philosophy of darkness.

It is important for us to remember that this German philosophy is false—false in the simplest sense that it is untrue to fact. It is based upon a distortion of history, a distortion of psychology, a distortion of economics. The paradox into which it has led the Germans has been well described in these words about German theories of economic nationalism.

‘In the full tide of the age of Abundance and Interdependence they use the language of the long ages of Drudgery, Penury, and Isolation. Power for them still means the power of man over man rather than the power of man over Nature. A neighbour for them is still a potential enemy, spying for an opportunity of loot. Two neighbours constitute two enemies and a possible war on two fronts, which, with a little exaggeration, becomes an ‘encirclement’. Countries endowed with natural resources which their inhabitants are only too anxious to sell in the world-market are stores of treasure jealously withheld from a hungry warrior tribe . . . Political Economy, as we have understood it in the West for 150 years, is discarded—or rather, it is treated as an annex to the art of war. The Quartermaster’s office is the centre round which revolves the economy of the Totalitarian State.’<sup>1</sup>

Between this apotheosis of violence and our belief that mercy and justice are the qualities of the strong, between our reading of the history of human

<sup>1</sup> Sir Alfred Zimmern, *The Prospects of Civilization* (Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs, No. 1, p. 30).

evolution as the widening triumph of intelligence, co-operation, and mutual aid, and this 'nostalgie de la boue', there can be no compromise, no hope of appeasement. Indeed our greatest problem after the war will not be the reconstruction of our own shattered economic and social life, but the 'decontamination' of German youth from the death-laden atmosphere with which it has been surrounded.

Here, then, we discover the ultimate origins of this war. We are not fighting for the shifting of boundary posts a few score miles to the north or south or east or west. We are not fighting to maintain a rule of privilege or monopoly in our own country. We are fighting for a particular way of life. This way of life allows for change, and looks for betterment; already, through the sacrifice and energy of past generations it has brought us out from barbarism, and set us towards a reasonable and humane existence. We are fighting against a nation of many millions, strongly compact, brave, crafty, and bound in Dervish-like submission to an opposite way of life. As long as they accept this submission, our good is their evil, and their evil is our good.





